

9 March 1971

## MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi, Tchepone, and Chinese Troops in North Vietnam:  
A Speculation

## NOTE

SNIE 13-10-71, "Communist China's Reactions to Developments in Laos," (18 February 1971), set out a number of possible moves that China might make in response to the allied incursion into southern Laos. These included the re-introduction of Chinese logistic personnel into North Vietnam, a show of stepping up road construction in northwestern Laos, the dispatch of reconnaissance personnel beyond the present area of road construction toward the Thai border, and the assignment of military personnel *in an advisory role* to NVA forces in southern Laos. All of these measures would be designed to raise apprehension, particularly in the US, over a larger Chinese intervention without in fact involving much real risk.

The SNIE concluded, however, that Peking would be unlikely to send combat troops into the Plain of Jars area or southern Laos unless US troops or ARVN forces, having destroyed communist

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forces around Tchepone, should move northward with the apparent intent of carrying the war into North Vietnam or northern Laos. We believe that the judgments reached in the SNIE are still valid. This memorandum discusses possible effects of the last month's fighting in southern Laos on Hanoi's situation and considers the possibility that it might now invite Chinese combat units into North Vietnam.

SUMMARY

Hanoi has committed large forces to southern Laos and they are suffering relatively high casualties; if Hanoi remains determined to deal ARVN a heavy blow, additional forces may soon be needed in this sector. Reserves are available in North Vietnam, but Hanoi might fear that their use would expose the homeland to large-scale allied raids or incursions. It is possible, therefore, that Hanoi would call on Peking to deploy combat troops to North Vietnam to free North Vietnamese units for use in Laos. Peking would almost certainly comply, although it would be careful to limit its involvement in size and geographical extent. In any event, Hanoi's course in Laos is likely to become apparent soon; for weather reasons any large-scale action against the South Vietnamese incursion is not likely to be deferred beyond early May. Thus, if Chinese troops are to be dispatched to North Vietnam, they will probably start showing up within the next few weeks.

The North Vietnamese Commitment to Southern Laos

1. The North Vietnamese have chosen to make a major stand in southern Laos against the South Vietnamese thrust into the Tchepone area. Not only does the allied offensive threaten the critical communist logistical lines into South Vietnam and Cambodia, but strong counteraction might -- in Hanoi's view -- provide an opportunity to inflict a major setback to the South Vietnamese forces in an area where the communists are well-entrenched. The fighting has been fierce, and the communists have been willing to accept heavy casualties in attempting to block the South Vietnamese incursion. While it is still much too early to say that the campaign will be a turning point in the war, its outcome will undoubtedly be significant in determining future strategy on both sides.

2. In joining the battle in southern Laos, the North Vietnamese have substantially augmented their forces in the Tchepone area. As of 1 February, 22,000 North Vietnamese combat troops were estimated to be in southern Laos, 11,000 of these in the general area of Tchepone.\* Since then, the communists have

[Redacted]

increased their forces in this area by some 18,000 men -- most of these (about 14,500) from North Vietnam. There are indications that at least another regiment from North Vietnam may also be in the process of moving into southern Laos. Finally, the bulk of the communist regular combat units in South Vietnam's Military Region 1 -- about 17,000 men -- are involved in operations within South Vietnam designed to obstruct allied operations in nearby areas of southern Laos.

3. The movement of combat troops to southern Laos has created gaps in the communist reserve force in the Vinh-DMZ area -- the North Vietnamese "panhandle". In addition to the estimated 14,500 troops sent into Laos from this area, some 5,000 additional troops have moved northward out of the Vinh area. Further, major elements of a North Vietnamese artillery regiment (800 - 1,000 men) have redeployed from southern North Vietnam to Quang Tri Province in northern South Vietnam. The net effect of these moves has reduced the number of North Vietnamese combat forces in the Vinh-DMZ area from nearly 40,000 to about 20,000 ground combat troops.\*

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\* In addition to these 20,000 combat troops, there may be about 5,000 regional forces in southern North Vietnam. Though not as formidable as regular units, the regional forces are full-time soldiers and capable of engaging in combat. Beyond these forces, there is an undetermined -- but probably large -- number of part-time militia.

Factors Affecting Hanoi's Strategy in Southern Laos

4. What is Needed? We do not know how Hanoi assesses its present combat performance in southern Laos. It is clear enough that the communists consider the area important and that they are willing to fight for it and to commit heavy resources to the effort. But whether they believe themselves faced with a "make or break" situation is not clear. They may consider the forces already committed, perhaps with only a modest augmentation, adequate to thwart the South Vietnamese move or at least to keep the offensive from inflicting irreparable damage on the communist position.

5. Time -- A Key Factor. Whatever Hanoi's plans are in southern Laos, the approach of the wet season must be a major factor in its thinking. By early May, weather conditions in southern Laos will be bad. This will not only drastically reduce the amount of air support available to the South Vietnamese, but it will also seriously impede their ground mobility. Indeed, flying conditions in the area are already limited because of bad weather. As a result, Hanoi must calculate that there is a high degree of likelihood that the South Vietnamese will begin to pull out of Laos in about six weeks.

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6. The strategists in Hanoi might believe that the best time to hit the South Vietnamese hard would be when the weather is bad, air operations limited, and the South Vietnamese withdrawing. In any event, if Hanoi is planning a major infusion of new combat forces to the area in time for action by mid- or late April, it would have to be gearing up for the effort without delay. Thus, it may be that Hanoi is presently facing -- or will soon face -- the necessity of deciding whether and from where to commit new forces to the fighting.

What's Left for Hanoi to Commit?

7. The demands upon communist manpower have grown over the past year or so. In addition to maintaining a home defense force and training base in North Vietnam, the communists are now fighting on four distinct fronts in Indochina -- South Vietnam, Cambodia, northern Laos, and southern Laos. (See following table for the disposition of North Vietnamese forces in Indochina.) During 1970, North Vietnam increased the mobilization of manpower for military service. We are not able to determine how extensive this mobilization has been or the size of the reservoir of newly trained personnel which could be rapidly dispatched to the fighting

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in southern Laos. The communists, as discussed below, could divert forces from other operational areas, but this would result in a diminution of communist activity and presence in these areas, and make the remaining communist forces more vulnerable to allied action.

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## TABLE

Disposition of North Vietnamese Forces in Indochina by Area1 March 1971

<u>North Vietnam</u>	<u>364-384,000</u>
Regular Army	300-320,000
ground combat	(100-120,000)
AAA	(35- 40,000)
AF/Navy	13,000
Regional forces	51,000
<u>South Vietnam</u>	<u>80- 95,000</u>
Combat	45- 50,000
Administrative Support	35- 45,000
<u>Cambodia</u>	<u>40- 45,000</u>
Combat	20- 25,000
Administrative Support	20,000
<u>Laos (North and South)</u>	<u>110,000</u>
Combat (including AAA)	70,000
Command/Support	40,000

8. With roughly half of its combat forces in southern North Vietnam already committed to the fighting in Laos, the force structure in this area is already stretched thin. Hanoi might hesitate to send a large portion of the remaining force in this region into Laos, unless it could plan on sending new units to take their place. Whether or not the leaders in Hanoi put much credence in the repeated statements by South Vietnamese President Thieu that he might "invade" North Vietnam, they do appear concerned over the increase in South Vietnamese actions along the North Vietnamese coast, e.g., shellings and the landing of "raider" teams. In any event, Hanoi would be reluctant to risk leaving the homeland inadequately protected against the contingency of a South Vietnamese thrust into North Vietnam.

9. Hanoi could always opt to send units from the more northerly areas of North Vietnam to fight in southern Laos. Excluding the forces from Vinh southward, there are about 80,000 to 100,000 ground combat personnel in North Vietnam and something on the order of 45,000 regional forces. The regular combat personnel are organized in three divisions -- only one of which, the 325th, has had combat experience as a unit against allied forces -- and 35 separate regiments or regimental

equivalents. We know nothing of the quality of these troops. Nor do we know how many troops Hanoi considers essential to maintain in the Tonkin area. But since this is the strategic heartland of the country, we believe that the communist leaders would be reluctant to scale down this force too drastically.

10. There are troops in other sectors which the North Vietnamese could, in theory at least, deploy to southern Laos. For example, in northern Laos there are some 20,000 regular North Vietnamese combat forces.\* Some of these could be pulled back to North Vietnam, either to be sent south or to serve as replacements for units deployed from Tonkin to southern Laos. This, however, would weaken the communist position in northern Laos and might encourage Vang Pao to mount an offensive operation to exploit communist vulnerabilities, particularly with the wet season approaching. Similarly, Hanoi could order some of its units in Cambodia to move up into southern Laos, although the distances involved and, more important, the on-going South

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\* There are two North Vietnamese divisions committed to northern Laos, the 316th and the 312th. Only two regiments of the 312th division are actually in Laos, the other regiment apparently being held as reserve in North Vietnam.

Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia would make this a doubtful and risky venture. Additional communist units could also be diverted from South Vietnam to southern Laos. But the distances involved would probably make this feasible only for the forces now in the South Vietnamese highlands. And since the communists do not have many troops in this area, it is unlikely that significant numbers could be dispatched in time to be a factor in the fighting around Tchepone.

11. In sum, North Vietnam might face a serious dilemma if it wanted to commit quickly large numbers of new combat personnel to the fighting in southern Laos. Diversions from other battlefields would weaken the overall communist position in Indochina. Any large-scale redeployment of North Vietnamese troops out of North Vietnam, on the other hand, could leave the homeland relatively undefended -- a position that Hanoi might find too risky.

A Call to Peking?

12. Faced with this situation, Hanoi might have to choose whether to forego large-scale reinforcement of southern Laos or to request Chinese forces to fill the gaps left by units deployed from North Vietnam. There is little evidence to suggest which

alternative Hanoi might adopt, but we believe that there is at least a possibility that Hanoi views the outcome of the fighting in southern Laos as critical to its ultimate success in South Vietnam, and that it might, therefore, be willing to go so far as to ask Peking to station combat units in North Vietnam.

13. Hanoi would be loath to invite large numbers of Chinese combat troops into North Vietnam, particularly into the populous Hanoi-Haiphong area. The Chinese, of course, are viewed with mixed emotions by the North Vietnamese leaders and population. On the one hand, they are fellow-communists whose support in the war against the US has been extremely important. On the other hand, the Vietnamese harbor a long historical animosity toward the Chinese and are uncertain of China's ultimate aims in Southeast Asia, including Laos and Cambodia. Moreover, the North Vietnamese pride themselves on their self-reliance. To call on China for troop support would be galling to Hanoi and might undermine confidence in the leadership. But the North Vietnamese have accepted Chinese military personnel on their soil in the past.\* And, in any event, Hanoi might calculate that a

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\* Upwards of 50,000 Chinese construction and AAA personnel were deployed along logistic lines in the northern areas of North Vietnam while the US was bombing the country.

small Chinese presence would suffice to warn Saigon and the US that China was indeed willing to fight should North Vietnam be directly threatened.

Peking's Attitude

14. Throughout the war, China has followed a very circumspect course in the extent and nature of its involvement. It would like to continue doing so. But if Hanoi made a strong case for the need to station combat troops in North Vietnam, Peking, in our view, would almost certainly send them. For its own reasons, Peking too would not want to deploy a very large combat force to North Vietnam. It would be concerned lest such a precipitate action trigger renewed heavy bombing of North Vietnamese territory and the Chinese forces on it; or worse, that it might be conceived by the US as a threat to South Vietnam itself. In this connection, Peking would prefer to confine its forces to northern North Vietnam where such risks would be diminished.



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15. The recent visit of Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to Hanoi is a reflection of Hanoi's concerns in the current situation. The publicity accorded the visit and the tone of the communique are obvious elements in a Hanoi/Peking effort to deter any northward expansion of the current US/ARVN operations in Laos and any raids or excursions into North Vietnam itself. But if Hanoi does, in fact, view the current situation with the degree of alarm suggested in this paper, there could have been discussion of the actual timing and conditions of the entry of Chinese combat or logistic troops into North Vietnam. If so, we should soon be seeing signs in Peking's propaganda and probably in other channels as well.



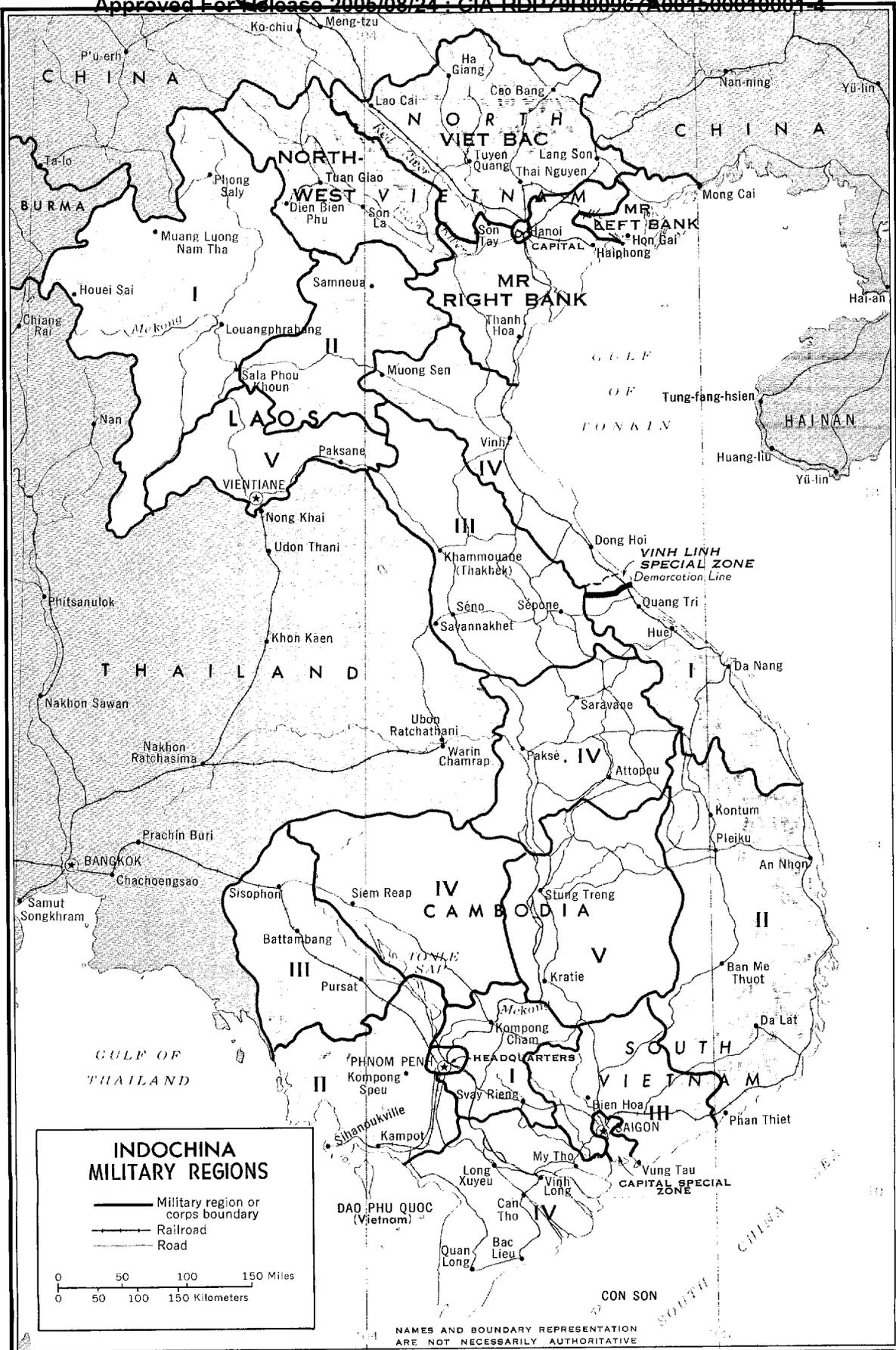
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